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**Latinx**  
spaces

# 'SUBVERSIVE KIN: THE ACT OF TURNING OVER' AT THE CLEMENTE, NY

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Tatiane Santa Rosa



Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira, "Ollin Mecatli II" (2018-2019), from the *MEDA* series, pigment print on rice paper, 12 x 10 inches

What does it mean to subvert? What does it mean to make kin? What does it mean to turn over? These are some of the questions that the exhibition *Subversive Kin: The Act of Turning Over* sought to address. Installed earlier this year at The Clemente in New

York, the exhibition curated by Elisa Gutiérrez Eriksen featured the works of Tatiana Arocha, Bel Falleiros, Christine Howard Sandoval, and Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira. More than their shared roots in Turtle Island or Abya Yala, these women's practices share akin energy: a desire to transform the present through deep knowledge and healing of the past. These artists seek to understand how their lives, and the lives of their ancestors, are/were irremediably linked to the land.

The natural environment of different sites is present in the exhibit, brought into the gallery space to tell stories. In the exhibition, dirt, mud, trees, leaves, stones, rock formations, water streams, heart-shaped vessels, old bones that excavate the earth, and the forest are invited by the artists to speak to viewers. From the sacred water sites of Pueblos in Taos, New Mexico, to Colombian rainforests; from the traces of nature in São Paulo to the US' Southwest arid lands, these artists trace back colonial action and the present-day capitalist corruption of all things, natural and spiritual.



Installation view of *Subversive Kin* at The Clemente, NY. In rear center Tatiana Arocha's "Estranguladora" (2021), latex print on cotton canvas, hand-painted with acrylic, 18 x 5 feet

One of the centerpieces of the exhibition is an extraordinary 18-by-5-foot canvas that hangs from the ceiling gently lying on the room's floor. This is Tatiana

Arocha's "Estranguladora" (Strangler) (2021), a primarily black and white painting that depicts a Colombian rainforest scene. By replacing the vibrant greens from prevalent representations of nature in popular culture with monochromatic tones, the artist displaces the stereotype of the tropical rainforest. The top of the canvas shows a complex composition of tree canopies, with long and interlacing branches, roots, and leaves that get juxtaposed with a solid gold background covering the entire lower end of the canvas. The use of the black and white tones in contrast with the golden background could be read as a suggestion of timelessness and preciousness. If one considers the horrific ways through which rainforests such as the Amazon have been impacted by human exploitation, one feels that this scene is either threatened or already part of a past.

The piece depicts a fig tree known across Latin America as *matapalos*. Instead of growing from the ground, the fig tree attaches itself to a host tree, enveloping it in a way that resembles strangling action. The roots of the strangler fig species climb the host plant and grow upward and away from the ground, pursuing sunlight in the crowded and dark aerial spaces of rainforests. Some call it a parasite, others a timekeeper of the forest: either way, perhaps instead of categorizing *matapalos* as either "good" or "bad," one can understand these trees as a subversive species, a species that does not conform with the human-made norms of what a tree is. This also makes me think that *matapalos* are not so different from those human beings who eschew societal norms and resist or attempt to turn them over, like the exhibition's title indicates.

In addition to her painting, Arocha also shows an installation, "Entrelazándome con el territorio" (Weaving Myself Into The Land) (2019), comprised of a mosaic with dozens of polaroid photographs of rainforests displayed on a wall. The artist took these photographs during field trips in rainforests across Latin America, including her native Colombia. Part of the installation is also a series of pressed plants, prints, and clay objects arranged over a wooden table placed in front of the mosaic of pictures. According to Gutiérrez Eriksen, these objects serve as the patterns and shapes that inspire Arocha's large paintings. The combination of these materials evokes the style of a scientific study room or botanical archive. Arocha explains that using this style is a way of reimagining the future of these environments. She says:

*"Influenced by — and in opposition to — the scientific texts and botanical engravings of colonial explorers, I alter my archive of flora and fauna to re-create and reimagine endangered ecosystems. ... I employ a monochrome palette as a metaphor for the endangered natural world, using black and white interrupted by details painted in gold, glimmering reminders of human avarice, and the violent costs of extractive economies."*

The monetarization of nature that Arocha touches upon has been of extreme urgency to rethink human presence on Earth. The concept of turning nature into currency is as old as the time of colonialism. Coloniality's constant making and remaking of worldviews, through which nature has been measured by human-constructed monetary values, have brought us to an irreversible point of destruction. In this pessimistic context, "to reimagine endangered ecosystems" is also an act of mourning them and giving humans

extra time to relate to these environments. It is an attempt to turn over colonialism, acknowledging its persistence in the aesthetics that colonial thought has created.

All artists of this exhibition seek, in their own ways, to turn over the remnants of coloniality. Like Arocha, Bel Falleiros also re-envision aspects of her birthplace, in this case São Paulo, seeking healing and honoring its lands' past. Another exhibition's centerpiece installation is Falleiros' "Eye of the Earth" (2019-2021), which the artist first created in São Paulo during a residency. The work is a reimagining of São Paulo's ancestral knoll—Inhapuambuaçu<sup>2</sup>—which gave origin to the megalopolis' foundational site. At The Clemente, Falleiros installed a 96 x 76 inches mound made of red clay, brick fragments, and unfired clay vessels that look heart-shaped and that Falleiros deposited around the mound's base and inside its top. The soil Falleiros used combined bricks from the shores of the Hudson River, with São Paulo's soil, and vestiges of US' Virginia's red clay soil, the first place the artist lived when she moved to the US. By combining these sites, Falleiros is interested in the notion of one's home as a grounding into the Earth. At the same time, she acknowledges the complex movements that take someone across borders, either physical or mental ones.





Bel Falleiros, "Eye of the Earth" (2019-2021), red clay soil, brick fragments and unfired clay objects, 96 x 76 inches

Bel Falleiros makes an analogy between the mound as a navel of creation and the pursuit of a center by placing the delicate heart-shaped vessels around and inside the clay mound. In one of the conversations generated by the exhibition, Gutiérrez Eriksen remembers that the heart too is one of the centers of the human body, obviously vital for it to function. Falleiros' earthwork's raw materiality recalls an ancient practice—the formation of old cities—at the same time, it seems to re-center the heart, directly linking it to the idea of home. Yet, this idea of home is far from a blind-sighted patriotic one: it welcomes memories of life in different sites and countries, and diverse, nonlinear, trajectories.

Falleiros also shows a graphite drawing of Inhapuambuaçu and two paintings that refer to the Brazilian political climate. For "Vermelho como Brasil" (2021), a diptych, Falleiros painted shapes that resemble tree stumps, drawing brushstrokes that emerge from the stump as if to mark the ghostly presence of the trees' trunks. She painted these on pieces of fabric that she dyed with brazilianwood pigment, a Brazilian tree species known for producing a red tint. In the 16th century, colonizers largely extracted brazilianwood, later violently naming Brazil those indigenous lands.

In his 2019's inauguration speech, anticipating his authoritarian ruling, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro said that Brazil would never again be "red" and that "red marginals" (in reference to communists, leftists, or "anyone with liberal thinking") would be banished from the homeland." Falleiros reclaims the red tones of brazilianwood, relating colonial violence with the current bloodshed that Bolsonaro has since sponsored, both before the pandemic and in his present necropolitics. He has openly dismissed the widespread danger of the COVID19 disease across Brazil, resulting in thousands of deaths. The ghostly presence of the trees makes me wonder: is it possible to turn over present-day malevolent acts of destruction? Or can we only grieve and mourn them for as long as we exist?



Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira, "Spider Woman embrace" (2018-2019), from the *MEDA* series, pigment print on rice paper

Still, seeking ways of healing is necessary, if not urgent, both individually and collectively. For healing is not bound to success or failure. It is a long and intergenerational process that takes decades, centuries. In dialogue with Falleiros' grounding as a restorative practice, Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira's work also centers

around notions of healing. For *Subversive Kin*, the Ecuadorian-born artist presents a series of photographs titled *MEDA* (2018-19) that, as Miranda-Rivadeneira says, “explore our relation to nature from the principle of myth and memory embedded in the body as the first land and the land as the first body.”<sup>3</sup> Photographs, some colored, others black and white, hang on the gallery’s wall, intimately arranged as if they were part of a diary or sketchbook.

Taken at US’s Southwest landscapes where Miranda-Rivadeneira lived, the photographs show bare women’s bodies performing in arid desert landscapes. A vertical picture portrays a rock formation that covers almost the entire frame, only cut by a small sky area at the top of the image. The veins of the formation and the rocks’ prolonged exposure to erosion and weather created exquisite textures and shapes, negative spaces, small openings that move in and out of the formation. Some of these small caves and depressions are womb-like. In one horizontal crevice, a woman lays naked, almost completely filling the negative space of the opening. Resting or sleeping, with eyes closed, the woman occupies a physical and spiritual space—a space of in-betweenness, a threshold between the human and non-human.

Past feminist movements sought to oppose the conflation of women with nature, rightfully concerned with the long history of patriarchal rationale that subjugated women based on constructed sex hierarchies. But Miranda-Rivadeneira’s images do not rely on the sexualization of women’s bodies. Instead, these works reclaim our rightful place in the environment as whole vessels that carry ancestral bodily knowledges. Long excluded from the western notion of feminism, these knowledges have always been part of numerous indigenous women’s culture’s worldviews. Many indigenous cultures think of human bodies and the land as extended, inseparable entities. Or, in the words of an Ecuadorian women’s chant that Miranda-Rivadeneira included in the show, “Katsaka tausi nujinia anaka, ta. Ta muricha, nukiti, rapaka, naka ta anamishuka,” or “we are made of memories, of water, oil, mud, blood and salt.”<sup>4</sup>



Installation view of *Subversive Kin* at The Clemente, NY. On left Christine Howard Sandoval's "Land Form III Mother Ditch" (2019) and "Land Form II Diversion" (2019), adobe mud and graphite on paper, 52 x 40 inches

To make subjugated bodies and acknowledges visible is also a fundamental part of Christine Howard Sandoval's practice. Of Chalon Ohlone and Hispanic descent, Sandoval has studied the past and present histories of her ancestral home. In *Subversive Kin*, she presents two diptych drawings, "Land Form III Mother Ditch" (2019) and "Land Form II Diversion" (2019). These works are part of a long-term series of drawings titled *Channel*, in which the artist draws with adobe mud. These large horizontal diptychs are displayed one above the other on the wall. The drawings depict abstract geometric patterns traced with graphite and encrusted with adobe earth, originally wet, and left to dry.

In one of diptychs, the top drawing looks like an inverted fork. Made by masking specific areas, three vertical stripes emerge from the bottom of the composition to meet a horizontal bar that traverses the drawing from side to side. A central vertical stripe cuts the entire picture, from bottom to top. These stripes are filled by a thin striped pattern of adobe lines and blank spaces of paper that the artist protected with masking. The resultant rectangular areas on the bottom and top are filled by encrusted adobe, forming areas of terracotta color. The other drawing in the diptych shows a semi-circular shape



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filled by a similar striped pattern of thin adobe lines and blank spaces, centralized on the top of the picture. Dried, slightly cracked, coatings of adobe completely occupy the remaining area of the drawing.

In her work “Live Stream” (2018), a 32-minute video filmed at Acequia Madre in Taos, New Mexico, Howard Sandoval enacts a similar act of reclaiming. For this project, the artist investigated the history of community-operated watercourses used for irrigation by the Spanish invaders throughout their colonized territories. In Spanish called “acequias,” some watercourses’ sections are formed by open ditches with dirt banks that indigenous peoples created way before white invaders arrived. As the artist says, these are “contested sites” made by complex historical juxtapositions.



Installation view of Christine Howard Sandoval's “Live Stream”

Using a body camera, the artist physically retraces these pathways while narrating their history, especially the indigenous histories that have been erased or undermined by mainstream discourse. Throughout the video, she weaves these histories with the physical space she visits. The slow pace of the artist's voiceover contrasts with the content of her narration, from which we learn the history of struggle and injustices that

have marked these sites. She walks through areas of the Arroyo River, part of the Taos' acequia system, now completely dry, which made me associate the "disappearance" of that sacred water with the invisibility of the histories she tells us.

The video shows a partial view of Howard Sandoval's body and her shadow, and one watches as her boots make marks on the ground. The body camera footage gets twisted according to the artist's motion across the trails, complementing this disorienting experience that purposefully refers to how the state uses surveillance technology to control land and bodies. After acknowledging the Tiwa people's lands, at some point in the video, the artist says:

*"I wonder if the ground has anything to say. I wonder if the ground has listened to everything I said. I wonder if the ground could come alive and what is on it, though I hear what the ground says."*

Like other artists' works in the exhibition, Howard Sandoval's *Live Stream* clearly reveals the extent to how present-day state violence is rooted in colonial history. Her work also treats non-human bodies as sentient beings that deserve respect and reverence, that deserve to be heard.



*Subversive Kin* on view at The Clemente in New York City

The practices in *Subversive Kin* link past and present through reimagination, reclamation, and grounding, by turning over invisibility systems. The exhibition also

made a statement as a collective project. Because of the COVID19 pandemic, the show opened a year after it was initially scheduled. This delay allowed the curator and the artists time to start a prolific series of conversations that gave life to the term “kin” in the exhibition’s title. Some of these women also participate in Bel Falleiros’ Latinx women artists’ gatherings, which she initiated a few years ago at AnnexB, a NY residency for Brazilian artists I worked at.

These exchanges made me think of a long history of women collectives and their labor of care that often goes unnoticed and unspoken. In *Subversive Kin*, curator and artists decided to make these processes transparent by publishing the conversations in the exhibition’s catalog. These are personal discussions filled with ruminations, hesitations, and declarations of commitment to their practices and their communities. I hope their words remain as a testament to just another moment in time in which we survived catastrophe by holding on to other women, even if we could not hold their hands.

<sup>1</sup>*Subversive Kin, The Act of Turning Over* catalog.

<sup>2</sup>Or “Eye of the Earth” in Guarani from Brazil.

<sup>3</sup>*Subversive Kin, The Act of Turning Over* catalog.

<sup>4</sup>Extracted from the exhibition catalog. Excerpt from “Old Memory Chants. Amaraka the eternal tales Zápara translation by Shimanu Ushigua, defensor de la selva.”